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ABSTRACT

Promoting coordinated and/or joint programs among local agencies is one strategy small, rural communities can use to cope with rapid population and economic growth. Interagency coordination is a process in which two or more organizations come together to solve a specific problem or meet a specific need. Coordination means more than just cooperation and ranges from informal information exchanges to formalized, joint relationships. Interagency coordination is particularly needed in times of rapid growth to deal with an increasing number of agencies, an increasing complexity and comprehensiveness of individual and community needs and problems, and an increasing number of special interest groups. Benefits include reducing duplication and overlap, covering gaps and oversights, minimizing conflicts, and giving smaller agencies a voice. Barriers may arise because of administrator training (to lead, not coordinate), internal agency structure, agency reputation, unequal power among agencies, or unclear goals. Initiating interagency coordination efforts can be facilitated if local organizations: identify the impacted area, key organizations, resource flow; define problems, needs, coordination structure, objectives; get commitment to the problem and to coordination; work toward a consensus; follow an action plan; and make sure agencies are notified of any benefits of their contribution. The guide concludes with 7 references. (BRR)

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# Coping with Growth

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# Interagency Coordination and rapid community growth

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Many small communities in the western United States are experiencing rapid population and economic growth. Newly built power plants, mining operations, seasonal residents, tourism, and in-migration in rural communities are significant causes for rapid growth. While most communities welcome growth and see it in a positive light, few are prepared to deal with many of its attendant problems. Rapid growth often causes strain on local government decisionmaking and tax structures. There can be pressure to develop more land for urban uses, to provide more public services, to increase employment, educational, and recreational opportunities, and to provide new housing and commercial establishments. It is impossible for any community to simultaneously implement all the alternative strategies that will help meet the diverse needs brought on by rapid growth. One strategy that may help soften growth's impacts is the promotion of coordinated and/or joint program efforts among local agencies.

## What is interagency coordination?

Interagency coordination can be defined as a process in which two or more organizations come together to solve a specific problem or meet a specific need. It carries with it the assumption that by working together, agencies will increase their effectiveness, resource availability, and decisionmaking capabilities—and thereby more effectively assist in the resolution of a community need or problem that could not be met by any single agency acting alone.

A common misconception is that interagency *coordination* means only *cooperation*.[1] Certainly, any joint effort among agencies requires that they cooperate. However, agencies may be cooperating on one issue, competing on another, and in direct conflict on still another issue. For example, a local planning department and a housing authority may be cooperating on the development of a housing code. At the same time, both agencies may be competing for the authority to enforce the housing code—and they could well be in direct conflict over the code's relationship and application to existing housing stock.

[1] Klonglan, Gerald E., "Coordination Among Agencies for Rural Development: Some Current Research and Policy Needs," Iowa State University, Ames, 1976, p. 194.

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The term "coordination" itself is subject to a wide range of interpretations.[2] Studies of organizations have identified three levels of coordination. At its lowest level, agencies are familiar with the personnel and programs of other local organizations. There will be some informal communication, as well as the exchange of general knowledge and data. Membership in joint councils can also be identified as a low level of interagency coordination.

At the intermediate level, agencies have developed formal exchanges of information, resources, and personnel. They will also be participating in joint projects, although specific tasks and responsibilities will not have been clearly identified.

At the highest level of coordination, agencies will be engaged in joint budgeting of programs. Specific agreements as to goals and policies will be clearly understood, and probably written down as part of an overall joint agreement. Agencies will also be well represented on overlapping boards and councils. Communities experiencing rapid growth may benefit from some level of coordination. Demands for new services and fast-changing needs and problems caused by growth can often be more easily resolved by agencies working together.

# Why is interagency coordination necessary?

Recent societal trends, most of them resulting from rapid growth and development, indicate that interagency coordination will benefit the agencies involved as well as the community.

### Trends

- **Increasing number of agencies.** As demands are placed on local units of government to provide a more diverse assortment of public services, the common reaction is to create another agency (or department within an existing agency) to meet that demand. This has resulted in many organizations functioning to serve similar needs, and fragmentation of responsibilities within many organizations.
- **Increasing complexity of community needs and problems** means that solutions will also be complex. To achieve their purposes, organizations need access to a wider range of resources, information, and expertise than ever before. Coordination with other agencies is usually the most economical and expedient method of gaining access to needed resources.
- **Increasing comprehensiveness of individual and community needs.** Most needs have become interrelated in such a way that no one agency can meet them totally. For example, a community experiencing rapid growth may need more housing, improved streets, more social services, and additional recreational facilities. Coordinating the resources of several agencies will ensure that services are more comprehensive, with the top priority needs being met first.

[2] Ibid., p. 197.

- **Increasing number of special interest groups.** It is becoming more difficult to respond to the diverse special interests making demands on agency resources and technical assistance. One method of serving these special interests more effectively is for agencies to coordinate efforts to make efficient use of available manpower and resources.

### Benefits

The above trends highlight the need for interagency coordination. In addition, there are benefits for both the agency and the community when organizations make a concerted effort to coordinate their programs and activities. Some of these benefits follow:

1. **Reduced duplication and overlap.** With several agencies working to resolve similar problems and meet community needs, duplication of services and assistance can occur. Coordinating agencies can help avoid wasted effort by sharing resources and explicitly stating who is responsible for specific tasks.
2. **Covering gaps and oversights.** Having several agencies actively working in a community does not ensure that all needs are being addressed. Coordination promotes an exchange of ideas and viewpoints, leading to a broader definition of the community needs that joint agency efforts should address.
3. **Minimizing conflicts.** Improved interagency coordination can often prevent unnecessary conflicts. Agencies who are communicating and sharing ideas and information can avoid the mistaken interpretations of community needs that so often occur when organizations are working independently. Coordination can also facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of each individual agency's goals and purposes.
4. **Giving smaller agencies a voice.** A small, single-purpose agency often has problems making its unique contribution in a comprehensive community assistance program. Agency coordination can assist the small, less visible, and/or new organization through the sharing of information, resources, and technical assistance, thereby improving each agency's effectiveness.

### Barriers

Although many agencies agree that it is beneficial to coordinate as much as possible with other organizations, there is very little of this being done today. What does take place usually reflects a low level of commitment. Interagency coordination is hindered for several reasons; some of the barriers are discussed below.[3]

- **Administrator training.** Leaders of most agencies are schooled in the art of directing—not coordinating. The principles that foster a well-coordinated interagency or interdepartmental effort (compromise, consensus-building, group commitment) are often not within an agency director's field of expertise.

[3] Snyder, John P., "Working with Institutions," Rural Development Leaders School, Rural Development Service, 1977, pp. 6-8.

- **Internal agency structure.** How an agency is organized and operates can also be a barrier to coordination with other organizations. Internal reward systems seldom give credit to coordination efforts. Evaluation of program successes, goals achieved, and needs met usually ignores efforts toward agency coordination, concentrating only on the specific achievements that relate to an agency's defined responsibilities. Three characteristics common to most agencies are: ongoing efforts to instill organizational loyalty (especially at the administrative level); a tendency to define problems in terms of the agency's ability to solve them (tunnel vision); and continual drift toward single-purposeness. These traits all work against developing an interagency approach to meeting broad community needs and problem-solving. All of these characteristics tend to promote what is referred to as an organizational effort at "turf maintenance."
- **Agency reputation.** Many agencies have built high visibility and a good reputation by administering one program or one service very well. They see little value in becoming involved in coordinated programs where risks exist that might threaten their autonomy, reputation, or prestige. This is especially true for local organizations that have developed programs for a specific clientele in a specific geographic area.
- **Unequal power among agencies.** This affects both large and small agencies. Small agencies often feel they have little to contribute in the way of manpower, resources, or creativity to any coordinated effort involving larger organizations. They also fear that a loss of identity or autonomy will result from working with larger agencies. At the other end of the spectrum, large organizations, having access to most of the resources they need, often see no value in taking the time and effort to enter into joint endeavors with smaller, less visible agencies.
- **Unclear goals.** If agencies operating in a community are unclear as to the goals and purposes of their own organization, it will be very difficult to identify any common objectives they may share with other agencies. An inability to see where program links and similar purposes exist will hinder efforts to initiate interagency coordination. In addition, the organizational goals may differ widely from community goals.

# Making it work

Despite recognition of the necessity and benefits of agency coordination, it is seldom practiced with any degree of success in local communities. Because of the sudden changes brought on by rapid growth that affect the economic, political, social, and environmental conditions in a community, there is a greater need than ever to develop a coordinated approach for softening growth impacts. The following outlines a process that can be useful to local organizations in initiating interagency coordination efforts.[4]

[4] Klonglan, Gerald E. and Benjamin Yep, *Theory and Practice of Interorganizational Relations*, Iowa State University, Ames, 1972, pp. 200-201.

1. **Identify the area to be impacted by rapid growth.** This is important because a very large impact area will probably require that regional, state, and federal agencies be included in the coordinated effort. It may also be necessary to identify special interest groups that should be involved in any joint programs.
2. **Define problems and needs.** Two benefits result from correctly identifying problems to be solved. First, this should tell you if interagency coordination is necessary. Not all growth impacts lend themselves to multiple-organization efforts. If interagency coordination appears to be required, an adequate definition of problems and needs will help identify which organizations should be involved in the coordinated effort. Care should be taken not to identify problems solely in terms of solutions or activities that fit existing agency programs.
3. **Identify key organizations.** Both the geographic area being impacted and the defined problems/needs will help determine which agencies should be involved in any coordination effort. Consideration must also be given to what resources an agency has that will be of value in joint programs or projects. Knowledge of an agency's operating procedures, goals, purposes, and ongoing programs can aid in determining the role they should be asked to play. It then becomes critical to contact these organizations at the appropriate level. Personal contact made with the right person can increase the probability that a particular agency will agree to participate.
4. **Get commitment to the problem.** As much as possible, define the problems and needs to be addressed in terms familiar to agencies. Be explicit about cooperative goals and each agency's capability to perform the tasks for which they are most knowledgeable and best suited.
5. **Get commitment to coordination.** Several points must be stressed when developing an agency's commitment to coordinated projects. Care must be taken to show how each agency's organizational goals are parallel to the aims of the coordinated effort, and how these goals can be achieved through your project. Also, try to show how the project will fit the scale of each agency's management and resource capability, and how their involvement will increase the chances for success. Stress what their unique strengths will add to the project, and what knowledge they might be able to gain that will help them in the future. In short, show that you honestly want and need an agency's input—why you hope they will agree to participate, and how they also will benefit from interagency coordination.
6. **Work toward a consensus.** The art of compromise is important. In any coordination effort, no agency can have everything its way. Identify areas where trade-offs are possible to ensure that all involved agencies are satisfied with what is to be done. Admit that some agencies will probably benefit more than others, but stress the point that *all organizations will benefit to some degree.*



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7. **Identify resource flow.** Clearly indicate what resources each participating agency will have to provide, when they will be needed, and how they will be used .This will ensure that each agency knows what is expected and required in terms of funding, manpower, and physical resources.
8. **Define the coordination structure.** Each agency should understand how organizations will relate within the coordinated framework. Knowing in advance how decisions will be made, who will be considered the lead agency, and what is expected of each organization will prevent conflicts and lost time.
9. **Define objectives.** All agencies participating in a coordinated effort must agree to the goals, objectives, and policies that will guide their involvement. If possible, these guidelines should be put in writing to avoid misunderstanding. It is important that each objective be specific, acceptable, and possible for the agency involved. Each agency's initial objectives should be fairly easy to accomplish so they will be encouraged by early successes.
10. **Follow a plan of action.** A strong structure for interagency coordination plus solid commitments and well-defined problems cannot guarantee a successful coordination program. It is also important to translate the identified goals, responsibilities, and problems into a realistic plan of action. A procedure for feedback, evaluation, and recognition must be included so that each agency will know what positive impacts the coordinated effort is having on the community. In this way, agency enthusiasm for the project will be retained, as well as a willingness to become involved in future coordination efforts.
11. **If the community benefits from the coordinated effort, make sure the agencies are notified of the benefits from their contribution.** This needs to be tailored to the chain of command, but let management know so there can be rewards for these efforts.

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